DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 039 830 HE 001 521

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TITLE	Substance and Processes of Innovation in an Office of the Vice President for Academic Affairs.
INSTITUTION	American Association for Higher Education, Washington, D.C.
PUB DATE	5 Mar 70
NOTE	8p.; Paper presented at a meeting of the American Educational Research Association, Minneapolis, Minnesota, March 5, 1970
EDRS PRICE	EDRS Price MF-$0.25 HC-$0.50
DESCRIPTORS	Administrative Personnel, *Administrator Role, *Decision Making, Educational Change, *Educational Innovation, *Higher Education, *Innovation

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this paper was to analyze the decision making process regarding the introduction of innovations in a large private university and the roles played by a Vice President for Academic Affairs (VPAA). The formal correspondence and records of the VPAA's office were screened to identify decisions regarding innovations in that office over a period of one year. The 72 innovations thus identified were then classified by: (1) disposition, (2) source of entry into the university, and (3) source through which the VPAA learned of the innovation. Ten innovations were selected for case study. This paper deals primarily with the characteristics of the VPAA's role in the following stages of the decision-making process: (1) knowledge-stimulation, (2) interest-initiation, (3) attitude change-legitimation, (4) collective or individual decision, and (5) implementation. The indications were that the VPAA's role in collective decisions was more oriented toward educational nuturance, and in individual decisions, was more related to policy and finance checking. The VPAA was more likely to be an initiator, legitimizer and decision maker, than stimulator or implementer. Most innovations enter the university through constituents of the academic community, and there seemed to be little effort to implement innovations by replacing existing programs. (AF)

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Session 17.7

Paper presented at AERA
on March 5, 1970

ED039830

SUBSTANCE AND PROCESSES OF INNOVATION IN AN OFFICE OF THE VICE PRESIDENT FOR ACADEMIC AFFAIRS

University administrators are continually challenged by problems of deciding which new ideas they should nurture and implement. They are instrumental in determining what monies shall be spent and where, and how revenue shall be obtained. Administrators have the responsibility of developing effective ~~way~~ ways of bringing all the resources of the university to bear on the innovative process within it. They have to decide, individually or collectively, which areas of interest should be emphasized to promote institutional and academic objectives.

The purpose of this paper is to analyze the innovation decision-making process in a large private university and the roles played by a Vice President for Academic Affairs (hereafter referred to as the VPAA) in the stages of this process.

By modifying definitions of stages of innovation decision making used by Everett Rogers (1962, 1968, in press) it was possible to construct a theoretical framework within which to explore and review roles of vice President in stages of both the collective and individual decision-making process. These revised stages were: knowledge-stimulation; interest-initiation; attitude change-legitimation; individual or collective decision; and implementation.

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In order to examine the VPAA's role in these stages, the formal correspondence and records (inter-office memoranda, letters, selected university minutes, reports, committee and project plans) of the office studies were screened to isolate innovations visible in that office over a period of one year. The seventy-two innovations thus isolated were then classified: (1) by disposition (adopted, rejected, in process); (2) source of entry into the university (external or internal); and (3) source through which the administrator studied learned of the innovation (external or internal). Ten innovations were selected for case study.

Conclusions

My remarks concerning conclusions and implications are limited in this paper to the following question:

What are the characteristics of the VPAA's role in the stages of the innovation decision-making process?

a. Knowledge-Stimulation Stage

In the knowledge-stimulation stage the VPAA became aware of the exixtence of a specific innovation and sensitive to its potential value.

It appears from the research that the VPAA was, by virtue of his position and duties, continually a target for potentailly innovative knowledge and stimulation. As such, he was sensitive to possible sources of new ideas and ready to consider current innovations for his institution. The mass media provided a veritable barrage of information. Personal contacts with alumni, other college administrators, other institutions of higher education, accrediting bodies, and other persons were additional sources of information.

Legislation of federal and state governments, information about foundation and government grants available, problem situations on campus, and the emergence and confluence of his own ideas were potential sources of innovation.

b. Interest-Initiation Stage

The VPAA moved from the stage of knowledge-stimulation to interest-initiation when he saw potential value in an idea and was moved to seek more information about it and introduced it to others to gauge its merit. Research indicated that the VPAA was the actual source of entry for ten innovations in the year studied.

Research indicated that the VPAA nurtured and promoted ideas by formal speeches,campus or local newspaper articles, attendance at college or school faculty meetings and conferences, through memoranda and letters, or personal, informal consultations with groups or individuals. Not all such communication led to new programs or novel ways of doing things, but the seed for consideration of them was sown. His role might be classified as that of a "cultivator of receptiveness" as he developed a favorable climate for growth of innovations.

Movement of ideas for consideration within the university is at the heart of the interest-initiation stage. When response was negative at this stage, due to lack of interest, institutional readiness, finance or other reasons, the VPAA suspended his activity for the time being. When response was positive, the VPAA proceeded to the third stage of attitude change-legitimation.

c. Attitude Change-Legitimation Stage

After cultivating a receptive climate for a new idea, the VPAA then found himself in a position of making specific plans regarding

the acutal acceptance and implementation of an innovation. In this stage, the "nuts and bolts" job of considering the merits of the idea vis-a-vis its feasibility in terms of finance, staff, and space took place. His job was that of assessing the impact of proposed innovations for the university by raising pertinent questions in terms of totality of university commitment.

The VPAA's approval or disapproval took the form of modifying innovations, making his views known by advising faculty on proposals, expressing his thoughts on cost and staffing involved, or by allowing innovations to lie fallow in his office. The extent to which the VPAA was involved in modifying innovations was dependent on how much knowledge he possessed about them and in what stage they reached his office. If he learned that a proposal had already been forwarded to a foundation there was no opportunity for alteration. When a proposal reached him in the formulation or draft stage, however, he suggested revisions in content, other possible sources of financial assistance, or forwarded the proposal to others in the university where added interest might exist and past experience might best be utilized.

Legitimation was a sanctioning process. Characteristic of the VPAA's role in this stage was the outlining of courses of action for advancing innovations and processing them through the formal steps that marked the transition from the innovation on paper to the innovation as reality.

d. Collective or Individual Decision Stage

The climate of the situation and nature of the innovation determined whether a collective or individual decision would be made and what the characteristics of the VPAA's role would be.

Innovations dealing with curriculum change and administrative procedures affecting faculty were decided collectively in the University Senate. Responsibilities assigned to the VPAA determined his relationship to collective decisions on such innovations. If the innovation required University Senate approval, the VPAA played some of his roles within the policy-making mechanism associated with that body, generally in Senate committees or as a voting member of the Senate.

Senate committees were instrumental in developing innovations for consideration by the University Senate. They determined which innovations requiring action by the University Senate reached that body and in what form. The Senate Agenda Committee, of which the VPAA was a member, possessed the responsibility for placing innovative proposals before the University Senate. The VPAA was a major legitimizer within a Senate committee by virtue of his position in the university.

When the innovation under discussion did not involve approval by the University Senate and a decision on it was the individual responsibility of the VPAA, he worked directly with the Chancellor, other vice presidents, deans, directors, faculty and staff. Individual decisions were marked by both formal and informal consultation, especially on financial considerations. The circumstances of the case determined whether the VPAA had discretion to adopt or reject the innovation independently, or whether advice form others was binding. The need for consultation and concurrence appeared minimal or non-existent when funds were available in the university budget for implementation or when costs were judged so prohibitive that further action at the time could not be contempleted.

e. The Implementation Stage

The VPAA did not ordinarily participate directly in this final stage of the innovation decision-making process. When he did so it was to facilitate the efforts of others within the university in carrying out new processes.

Summary

The VPAA's role(s) in collective decisions were more educational-nuturance oriented, whereas in individual decisions they were more related to policy and finance checking. The VPAA was morelikely to be an initiator, legitimizer and decision-maker thatn stimulator or implementer in the innovation decision-making process. His role as a legitimizer due to pervasive ex-officio membership on committees was greater than indicated in previous research on innovation decision-making in universities.

Implications

The findings and conclusions of this study provide justification for the following four implications for the university:

(1) Faculty participation in collective decision-making may be greater than many faculty members realize. Collective decisions of the University Senate and Senate committees should be made more visible to all members of the academic community to emphasize their importance in the decision-making.

(2) An integral part of the innovation diffusion process in a university is the educational dialogue which constantly takes place among all constituencies of

the university. Innovations are nurtured and decided on the basis of such communication. From such communication, administrators learn of weaknesses in existing innovation decision-making procedures. In return, university administrators inform sponsors of innovations of sources of funding and outline procedures for gaining adoption of innovations. This implies that the communication process in innovation decision-making is a learning experience for all constituencies and should be further researched as such.

(3) Much has been said about the external origin of change and innovation in a university. Relatively little discussion has taken place on how innovations enter the university and are introduced to university administrators for consideration. The findings suggest that most innovations enter the university and reach the university administrator through constituents of the academic community, particularly deans and faculty. If such is the case, more time should be spend studying relationships of trustees, administrators, deans, faculty, staff and students to the innovation process in the university.

(4) This study revealed little effort to implement innovations through use of allocated budget funds in the form of replacements for existing programs. Are faculty aware that they could implement new ideas by shifting dollars they have rather than attempting

to start new programs with outside funds? Perhaps a university committed to the need for change should adopt the policy of budgeting a contingency item for emergency innovation. The reliance of private institutions on outside funds to support many innovations makes these alternatives worth careful study by sponsors of innovation.

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